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Desegregation model failing

ATTAINS SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY, NOT RACIAL

By Jonathan D. Glater
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New York Times News Service

SAN FRANCISCO

When San Francisco started trying to promote socioeconomic diversity in its public schools, officials hoped racial diversity would result as well.

It has not worked out that way.

Abraham Lincoln High School, for example, with its stellar reputation and Advanced Placement courses, has drawn a mix of rich and poor students. More than 50 percent of those students are of Chinese descent.

"If you look at diversity based on race, the school hasn't been as integrated," Lincoln's principal, Ronald J.K. Pang, said. "If you don't look at race, the school has become much more diverse."

San Francisco began considering factors like family income, instead of race, in school assignments when it modified a court-ordered desegregation plan in response to a lawsuit. But school officials have found that the 55,000-student city school district, with Chinese the dominant ethnic group followed by Hispanics, blacks and whites, is resegregating.

The number of schools where students of a single racial or ethnic group make up 60 percent or more of the population in at least one grade is increasing sharply. In 2005-06,

about 50 schools were segregated using that standard as measured by a court-appointed monitor. That was up from 30 schools in the 2001-02 school year, the year before the change, according to court filings.

The San Francisco experience is telling because after the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision restricting the use of race-based school assignment plans, many districts are expected to switch to economic integration plans like San Francisco's as a legal way to seek diversity. As many as 40 districts around the country are already experimenting with such plans, according to an analysis by Richard D. Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation, a non-partisan public policy research group.

The purpose of such programs is twofold. Since income levels often correlate with race, they can be a legal way to produce racial integration. They also promote achievement gains by putting poorer students in schools that are more likely to have experienced teachers, as well as a parent body that can afford to be more involved.

"There is a large body of evidence going back several years," Kahlenberg said, "that probably the most important thing you can do to raise the achievement of low-income students is to provide them with middle-class schools."

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